The Mystery Genre

By Colin Foulkes

As we have heard, there are a lot of guidelines provided fro writing good mystery fiction, but most of these guidelines would equally apply to all genres. In fact, I would say that the only requirement for a novel to fall into this genre is a corpse, and the solution to the mystery surrounding the corpse; the how’s and the why’s and especially the who’s.

From the mild amateur sleuths of Agatha Christie, to Jeff Lindsay’s Dexter; from Colin Dexter’s crossword-solving Inspector Morse to Thomas Harris’s Hannibal Lecter the genre accommodates all tastes (no pun intended, Mr Lecter).

Mystery novels often overlap other fiction genres.

For example, there are historical mysteries, from as far back as the Middle Ages in the Cadfael series by Ellis Peters (a pen name of Edith Parteger); C.J Sansom has the Martin Shardlake series of mysteries set in Tudor England; and of course, Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, Wilkie Collins’s Moonstone and Poe’s Murder in the Rue Morgue are historical due to their age.

Closer to home, Maureen Jennings, author of Murdoch Mysteries set in early twentieth century Canada also has a series of mysteries set in wartime London (England). Allan Levine, a Winnipeg author brings us Sam Klein, investigating crimes in early twentieth century Winnipeg.

Mystery novels merge with science fiction:

The Caves of Steel and I, Robot by Asimov; Red Planet Blue by Robert Sawyer. Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency by Douglas Adams.

Almost all mystery fiction falls somewhere in the realm of suspense.

Obviously Silence of the Lambs is far to the right on the suspense-o-meter, but gore doesn’t necessarily equate to suspense; Agatha Christie, who we may consider mild in comparison, was masterful in building high levels of suspense in many of her novels. Tana French, and Denise Mina (from Ireland and Scotland respectively) have written suspenseful contemporary mystery fiction.

I must admit a personal preference for mystery novels by modern British authors. Not that I read them exclusively but I find that while they cover the full range of styles they add an ingredient that seems missing in most North American, Scandinavian, South African, Outer-Mongolian (ok I don’t know about that) mysteries that I read. They have humour.

From the wry, dry cynicism, of Rankin’s Inspector Rebus:

*Me?’ Rebus had offered hs own shrug. ‘I just drink to be sociable.’  
‘And when does it start working?’*

To the quirky characters of Stuart MacBride’s Logan McRae

*Where Insch was bald, Steel looked as if someone had sellotaped a Cairn terrier to her head. Rumour had it she was only forty-two, but she looked a lot older.*

, or Christopher Brookmyre’s cynical Jack Parlabane,

*Parlabane found the word 'pro-active' enormously useful, as it immediately exposed the speaker as an irredeemable arsehole, whatever previous impression might have been given. Once upon a time, he remembered, people and companies just did things. But that ceased to be impressive enough, and for a while they 'actively' did things. Now they 'pro-actively' did things, but it was still the same bloody things that they were doing when they just plain old did things. Meaningless wank-language.*

to the absurd Mystery Man series of Colin Bateman

*Serial Killer Week got off to an inauspicious start when the opening wine and bean evening was invaded by a former prisoner who misinterpreted the poster, but he was at least able to give us the professional's view of the genre.*

. Other writers of this ilk: the Dangerous Davies series by Leslie Thomas, the wonderful Charlie Resnick series by John Harvey; Peter James’s Roy Grace novels, Mark Billingham’s Tom Thorne.

Murder most foul, with a punch line.